

Expert Report
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The basis of this report of the prevalence of sexting involving visual depictions among young adults (18-24 years old) comes from a national study reported by Gordon-Messer, D., Bauermeister, J. A., Grodzinski, A., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2012). The sampling strategy for this study involved a Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS). This procedure requires an initial sample of participants who then recommend others to complete a web-based questionnaire. The subsequent *referral chains* all extend from an initial individual who begins the chain (seeds). In our study the initial seed recommended 5 additional participants. Each person in the chain received a VISA e-gift card for \$20 for completing the questionnaire and a \$10 e-gift card for each referral they made who also completed the questionnaire. This continued until we stopped the chain process where the final group of participants only received e-gift cards for completing the questionnaire. The seeds were recruited through a Facebook advertising process that also took into consideration where they lived (region of the U.S.) and their self-defined ethnicity. We identified, a priori based on U.S. demographic data, how many seeds to recruit from each area based on region total population and race defined subgroup populations to help insure a representative sample.

Using procedures defined by Volz & Heckathorn (2008), we developed statistical weighting procedures to adjust for the clustering that resulted from the network referral process (to avoid oversampling from one seed versus another). This is necessary because participants recruited through the RDS are linked by their referral chains (those within an individual seed) and therefore have a commonality that needs to be accounted for in subsequent estimates (i.e., their responses may be correlated because they all come from the same seed). We weighted the data based on the following criteria that we collected from them: a) the number of young adults they estimate to know; b) the proportion of young adults they interact with online; and the racial homogeneity of their social networks.

Sample population

- 18-24 years old, live in the United States, have access to the Internet.
- N = 827 weighted individuals (from an original sample of 2,447)
- 52% Male
- Race/Ethnicity: 70% White, 12% Asian/Pacific, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Black/African American

Defining Sexting

We defined sexting as sexually suggestive photos or messages through cell phones or other media. We measured it by asking participants if they used their cell phone to send a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo of themselves to someone else or of they ever received such a text from someone they know on their cell phone. This is the same measured used by Lenhart (2010) and others.

Findings

Sexting Prevalence:

- Ever sent a sext: 30%
- Ever received a sext: 41%

Among those who reported sexting:

- Receivers Only: 13%
- Senders Only: 2%
- 2-way sexters: 28%

We believe our results are nationally representative of young adults who use the internet for several reasons. **First**, colleagues and I (Bauermeister, et al., 2012) examined how our data on last 30-day substance use (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, Ecstasy/MDMA, hallucinogens) matched up with use reported in other national studies that used different sampling strategies. We found comparable prevalence estimates for everything except cigarette use (our study participants reported more cigarette use). **Second**, our weighting system removed recruitment bias by adjusting for the RDS strategy we used. **Third**, our results are similar to other studies (Benotsch et al., 2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Benotsch et al. (2012) conducted an online study with 763 young adults. Their sample was recruited from a large public university and included 66% female and 53% white participants with an average age of 19 years old. Forty-Four percent (44.4%) reported sexting. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy was also an online survey. This study included a sample of 627 young adults (20-26 years old). Overall, 33% reported sending or posting a sext. Unfortunately, few studies of sexting among young adults or older populations have been reported to date. Most studies on sexting prevalence and consequences, although also not many, have focused on adolescent (under 18 years old) populations (Dake et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012).

According to the U.S. Census, the 18-24 year old population comprises 30,672,088. Extrapolating our prevalence rate of 30% would suggest 9,201,626 young adults have ever sent a sext. Similarly, extrapolation of our prevalence of 41% who ever received a sext would result in 12,575,560 18-24 year olds. Although such extrapolation is sometimes tenuous because a specific estimate based on one sample can capitalize on the error present in any study, the number of young adults involved in this behavior in some ways is quite significant. If, for example, our estimates were off by as much as 50%, a very unlikely scenario, the prevalence for sending would involve 4.6 million young adults and receiving a text would involve 6.3 million young adults.

Citations

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